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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 3457
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 0050
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1244
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JAN LIMA 4884
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 1114
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTIAGO 000131

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TAGS: PREL CI

SUBJECT: CHILEANS PERCEIVE THEIR BEST ALLY AS - DRUM ROLL
PLEASE - THE U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Kelly for reasons 1.5 (b and d).

Summary

¶1. (U) In a telephone poll taken by the influential "La Tercera" newspaper January 17-18, 2007, the U.S. was named by 38% percent of contestants as Chile's "principal ally," far and away ahead of Brazil (14%), Chile's traditionally perceived regional best friend. Ninety-five percent described U.S.-Chile bilateral relations as "good or average," trailing Mexico and Brazil. Moreover, the U.S. was tied with Argentina - again behind only Brazil and Mexico - as the nation for whom Chileans had the most "simpatia (affection)." The polling was done after the well-publicized announcement that Chile was being placed on the USTR's Priority Watch List. The results suggest Chileans are not swayed easily by appeals to regional solidarity, and are most interested in pragmatic outcomes. End summary.

Friends and Enemies

¶2. (U) "La Tercera's" poll, published January 21, was of 600 adults, living in urban areas, and has a four percent margin of error. The favorable perception of the U.S. as an ally was not mirrored when Chileans were asked about individual leaders, with President Bush one of only three leaders with a negative rating in "trustworthiness" (along with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales). Lula de Silva of Brazil was considered Chile's best friend, behind only Felipe Calderon of Mexico as most trustworthy (Calderon was second in the "best friend" category). Morales was tabbed by 67% of Chileans to be the nation's "worst enemy," followed by Chavez (46%).

¶3. (SBU) Bolivia as a nation was also seen as Chile's worst enemy (53%) followed by Peru (18%) and Venezuela (13%). No other country was in double digits. Bolivia's ranking is likely the result of recent statements by Morales on the "access to the sea" issue, anathema to the vast majority of Chileans, Peru's due to historical distrust between neighbors, and Venezuela's because of Chavez personally, whose bluster and inclination towards troublemaking does not sit well with Chileans. Argentina, Chile's other neighbor, was seen as both friend (10%) and enemy (6%), a dichotomy reflected as well in how President Kirchner was seen: friend (21%) and enemy (25%).

Pragmatic Beats Chumminess

4.(C) Comment: The polling was carried out 10 days after the announcement that Chile was being placed on USTR's Priority Watch List for continuing violations of its IPR responsibilities, a step much commented on in the media, but which seems to have been shrugged off by Chileans as not impacting our bilateral relationship. The same day as it released its poll, "La Tercera" also published an interview with Juan Gabriel Valdes, the former head of MINUSTAH (and a former FM under Eduardo Frei), in which he laments that Chile seemed to be drifting away from regional solidarity, with its focus instead on developing stronger economic ties with the world at large, particularly Asia, a policy that could leave it "isolated." The "La Tercera" results indicate Chileans disagree with Valdes and are pleased with the general direction of Chile's foreign policy. That includes having the U.S. as a strong partner, in a relationship which can withstand the occasional bump in the road. As importantly, the high negatives for Morales and Chavez indicate that their populist politics have little resonance with Chileans, who favor the pragmatic approaches followed as well by Brazil and Mexico. End comment.

KELLY